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THE MEANING OF SOCIOLOGY

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Every science has come up out of an embryonic stage in which the most evident activity was not discovery of something new, but rather attempts to establish the claims of something to scientific standing in case it were discovered. The sociologists in their turn have exhausted a disproportionate amount of strength upon the question, Is sociology a science?

Whether or not there is, or ever will be, a science of sociology, there is and will hardly cease to be something which, for lack of a better name, we may call *the sociological movement*. This movement clearly vindicates the sociologists. The phrase "sociological movement" is by no means an adequate description. It is pertinent chiefly because it calls attention to the strategic point around which a new alignment of thinkers is forming. The movement is not an attempt to isolate the facts of human association from the facts of the physical world in which association occurs. It is still less an attempt to set apart social phenomena from the processes in consciousness to which, as well as to the processes of subhuman nature, the facts of society must be related. It is rather a movement for the transfer of the center of attention in the social sciences from things and processes, as such, to the persons in whom all the things and processes that we know find their last intelligible interpretation. It is a movement to gain

for our conceptions of life a reality which they lack when scattered among uncorrelated abstract and impersonal sciences. It urges that scientific study of persons in actual association, and with their actual processes of association as the center of observation, is at present the most timely variant of our programme for extending and organizing knowledge of the meaning of human experience in general.

An eminent professor of political economy in a leading American university lately said that sociology is a science of "left-overs." He did not go far enough. Assuming for the nonce that we may speak of sociology as a science at all, its distinctive interest is not with a plurality of "left-overs," but with a single "left-over." The paradox of the situation is, however, that this single "left-over" is the object of final importance in human knowledge. After the evolution of sciences had culled out from the field of knowledge every action, accident, and appurtenance of men, and had taken countless assortings of these incidentals as the subject-matter of as many sciences, it began dimly to dawn on a few minds that attention to details was taking the place of due regard for the essential. Man himself was crowded out of the calculation. Sociology came into being mainly as an inarticulate protest against scientific attention to every other big or little object of knowledge conceivable, at the expense of virtual exclusion of the most central and meaning object of all from direct investigation; a protest against relegation of that paramount object to the rank of a "left-over"—viz., *man himself*.

Stating the situation in another way: A certain type of people who are studying human experience are converging toward a common center in pursuit of their object. Some of them see this. More are not yet aware of it. Whether they perceive it or not, many men and women who started from the standpoint of philosophy, or psychology, or ethics, or history, or political science, or anthropology, or religion, or philanthropy, or from unlabeled and uncritical points of departure, are assembling on the common ground of interest in the values that are lodged in human beings themselves. They are coming to see that their

appraisals of what has gone on in the world, and is now occurring, and may conceivably take place in the future, tend to correspond with their estimate of its importance for the human beings who are affected. But these people represent more than themselves. They really express the common note of desire throughout the whole course of human thinking. Back of all the obscurities and abstractions and mystifications into which thought has wandered, is the persistent question, *What does it all mean for men?* The interest behind this question is bound sooner or later to adjust the perspective of all science and to work as the last available measure of value for all supposed knowledge.

Whatever else may or may not be true about it, sociology, as pursued in the United States during the past quarter-century, is an incident in this clearing of vision about what is worth while in science, and why it is worth while. The people who named themselves sociologists are by no means the only persons who have veered toward this center of attention. If they had been, there would be much less meaning in their work. Among thinkers of every name there has been observed or unobserved, conscious or unconscious shifting of perspective. There has been progressive perception that, since we are human beings, the utmost interpretation which we can get of everything that can come into our experience must remain at best merely the meaning which we can discover from our limited outlook as human beings. At the same time we have progressed toward reality in another dimension by the corresponding perception that the worth of all things in our final estimate must get its rating from the standards of measurement which reflect the scale of values in the course of evolution in the consciousness of human beings. To express it more generally, *the final scientific problem is to ascertain the ratio of value for human experience of every factor which may enter into that experience.*

This conclusion may be taken as a summary of all that would be found in an exact inventory of that uncertain quantity which we call "modern thought." It is the substance of that apparition to which the recent papal rescripts refer as "modernism." In brief, *those things are significant for men which have a meaning*

for the evolving experience of men, and in the precise ratio of their ascertained influence upon the process of that experience.

From this point of view two primary judgments sooner or later assert themselves; first, the unit of our knowledge of experience must be the experiencing person, the human individual; second, as the experiencing person is not a phenomenon existing in a vacuum, as the human individual lives and moves and has his being by virtue of reactions with surroundings, it is of co-ordinate importance that our knowledge of the experiencing person shall be built up by organizing it with progressive knowledge of all the conditions which are the objective side of his experience.

This outlook fixes two areas as the chief planes of vision for modern science. It foreshadows progressive rearrangement of our knowledge and pursuit of knowledge with reference to these areas. To schedule one of them as primary and the other as secondary would be to relapse into an archaic logic. We have to think of two complex systems of factors at work in every passage of experience. These are on the one hand the acting person, on the other hand the conditions of his activity. That is, as a matter of working necessity we are forced to treat every problem of experience as an affair of the interworkings of two main groups of factors, persons, on the one hand, and the conditions under which personal activity operates, on the other.

This division gives us the finding marks of the modern phase of scientific investigation. On the one hand it is essentially psychological. Expressed in everyday words, it goes out to learn the makeup of persons. What is a person? How does he get into action? What decides how he shall act? What finally appraises the value of his acts? On the other hand, it is essentially physical. It brings into focus the universe which surrounds persons, of which on the one side persons are involuntary parts, which furnishes on the other side the bounds and also the fulcrums of all personal activity. The situation so considered must be treated as a realm of relations which appear to be of a different order from the relations that we classify as personal.

There are hypercritics who set themselves up as sentinels at

this point and challenge the right of peaceful scientific noncombatants to advance unless they give an account of themselves in unequivocally monistic language. People who are more interested in progress of objective analysis than in verbal purism must waste no ceremony in brushing these pedants aside. Whatever the strength of our belief in an ultimate oneness, our daily contacts are with situations composed of factors which we have to treat as dissimilar. In our present state of knowledge we have to move forward toward more knowledge by calculating as well as our means permit the interrelations between the two types of factors which we may call for convenience, *the factors of choice and the factors of force*.

Admitting the lack of precision in this summary way of outlining the main problem of knowledge, the practical fact is that the trunk line of advance toward better understanding of the things of most concern to men is clearing the way in this fashion; and academic science must eventually conform. Men want to understand first and last men's being, men's doings, and men's destinies. With apologies to Pope, the inevitable study of mankind is *manness*. Accordingly our audit of accounts with supposed knowledge is bound to pry more and more into the finality of our discoveries in two directions, and into the credibility of our interpretations of the relations between supposed discoveries under these two aspects: viz., what are the realities and the meanings of those activities which we have to think of as originating in men themselves, and what are the realities and the meanings of those activities which we have to think of as converging in and upon men, and making up their external conditions?

In the rough, if this formal requisition had been set up when men began to search for knowledge, it would have given us, as the first grouping of knowledge, our traditional classification into the *human* and the *physical* sciences. How long we shall continue to find this classification convenient, it would be profitless to ask. The cardinal point now is that, wherever thought is relatively free, there is an evidently growing disposition to assert independence of all scholastic tradition, beyond this primary and

obvious division for working purposes, whenever and to the extent that tradition virtually sets up sciences delimited by *a priori* conditions and classified as having an intrinsic and independent value. The protestantism which we call *the sociological movement* is fundamentally, and in part consciously and overtly, a declaration of faith that the closest approach to ultimate organization of knowledge which finite intelligence can ever reach must be a formulation of the relations of all alleged knowledge to the central process of human experience.

The general meaning of the sociological movement then is that it is the outward and visible sign of this invisible grace. It is giving new voice and force to this deepest of human strivings, the quest of self-knowledge. Poetry, mysticism, religion, science, political agitation, philanthropy, each in a thousand variations of its own peculiar *oratio obliqua*, has participated in this quest. Most of the sociologists were drawn as blindly and half-discerningly into the pursuit as the majority of like-minded thinkers past and present who have had their center in other groups. They are slowly arriving at qualifying self-consciousness. They are gradually adjusting their vision to the perception that in the last analysis there is but one conceivable human measure of value: viz., the meaning which the thing valued has for the prevailing conception of the whole system of human purposes. The intellectual side of this perception is that there is at last but one conceivable human test of alleged knowledge: viz., the kind and degree of its congruence with the rest that is supposed to be known about human experience.

In brief, then, the sociological movement is made up of the more or less conscious attempts to concentrate all our means of knowledge upon the task of interpreting human experience, its past, its present, its future, so far as past and present can project vision into the future.

It is not easy to convince anyone who has not long looked at things in this way that these propositions express anything beyond the commonplace. Is it not impudent to imply that interpretation of human experience has anything to gain from an upstart in social science? The whole series of historians, for example,

from Herodotus to the latest producer of a doctor's dissertation, has devoted itself to nothing else but human experience.

In a sense this is true. It may also be true that, for every sociologist who could be named, many historians might be mentioned who in their way have contributed more to knowledge of human experience. It would doubtless continue to be true that the sort of work done by historians would remain indispensable, even if it should turn out that the sort of work proposed by the sociologists is more vital. All these things, however, are aside from the point. The case for the sociologists may be compared with the relation of modern pathologists to the entire series of medical practitioners, from Galen to the era of Pasteur and Virchow. For thousands of years the medicine men had been dealing with diseases. Not until the pathologists developed their methods was there reliable study of disease. The case of the historians is strictly analogous, to the extent that they are satisfied with the application of a technique, and do not push its results into interpretation of the whole human process. Narrating the fortunes of nations and other institutions is logically at precisely the same remove from interpretation of the human beings who make and are made by the institutions, as description of their clothing or the cut of their hair. Either of these incidentals may be used for what it is worth in analysis of the persons who were expressing themselves by means of the incidentals. It is not at all certain, however, that a given study of a phase of human activities will go so far as to correlate itself with its essential center. It may stop and assert itself as virtually apart from the paramount human process. It may fail to find its place in the evolution of that *manness* which is the continuous principle in the whole process of experience. It may fail to translate its items of knowledge in terms of man's progressive self-expression, in which events and institutions are thrown off as by-products. *It is certain that no study of phases of human experience will yield its utmost for final knowledge of the experiencing persons, unless the people who pursue it adjust themselves to two conceptions, viz., first that the types of persons evolving into being through*

the succession of experiences are as near to the substance of the whole process as our intelligence seems likely to penetrate; and second that we shall approach the substitute for finality with which our knowledge has to be satisfied, in the degree in which we get the incidents of human life set in their tributary place in the essential process of human experience, the evolution of persons.

The clue to the sociological movement must be found then in this way of visualizing the social process. What we mean by the phrase "the evolution of persons" is quite different from mere preservation of the race. So far as we know at present the human species got its organic growth before the dawn of history. If there have been variations of anatomical type since that era they have not been demonstrated. This is true of the brain as well as the rest of the body. In their ways of using their endowment of body and brain and external opportunity men had a long infancy, but this infancy is passing into youthful variety. We have allowed our attention to rest so largely on the products of human action that we have hardly begun to distinguish the successions of types of actors. Social psychology, the most searching activity thus far in the sociological movement, is just fairly initiating the methods which must presently result in detailed exhibits of the evolution of personal types. For this ultimate value in the whole human process Herbert Spencer, for instance, had certain preliminary forms of language, but no specific discovery. In occupation, in thought, in adjustment to his fellow men the "modern man" in every active race is a more highly evolved type than the predecessors of the same man, "and it doth not yet appear what we shall be." The soul of the sociological movement is some sort of divination that this enlargement of persons, and achievement of a manness thus far only embryonic in the race as a whole, is the main motive in the human drama, so far as it will ever be made out by human intelligence. The cumulative power of the movement springs from faith that this process of human becoming is worth while. It is therefore worth understanding in order that it may be pro-

moted intelligently. The movement is thus not merely academic. In its animus it is essentially dynamic.

It would be absurd to claim that the sociological movement is confined to men who call themselves sociologists. It would fortunately be equally absurd to admit that all the men who call themselves sociologists really contribute to the movement. Many of the latter simply compromise and confuse and clog the movement. With these qualifications, however, it is true that the sociologists as a species of thinkers have undertaken, more deliberately and definitely than any other distinguishable group, to focalize scientific attention upon the actual living, aspiring, striving human being, as the center from which all human valuations must be computed.

The sociological movement is thus a concurrence of all the thought and practice which is impressed by this idea of the central significance of the human factor in experience. The sociologists are trying to represent the conviction that this idea is too important to be canceled from scientific consideration. They are not to be put off with the sneer that the idea is to be taken for granted, and so too elementary for serious notice. If it is obvious enough to be taken for granted, it is important enough to be kept in view, as a means of testing whether it actually is taken for granted, or set aside in favor of some deceptive substitute for the actual human criterion. In fact, every science is under constant temptation to transfer its attention from the reality which it should help to investigate, to manipulation of an esoteric technique in which notions abstracted from reality make up fictitious situations. The "science" which yields to the temptation thereupon degenerates into a methodology of dealing with problems of those devitalized situations. Each of the social sciences at present in some degree illustrates this tendency. A certain type of thinkers make it their business to call for a checking up of these technical abstractions, by finding whether they fit into the total process of experience. That type can never be permanently without occupation.

Popular interest and sympathy are relatively much more favorable to the sociological movement than the attitude of scien-

tific thinkers in general. The reason for this is less that the apparent opposition is real than that some of the most virile thinkers about selected phases of human conditions assume that their eye is trained as directly as it can be upon human interests, and they resent the implication that there can be a correction of their angle of vision. Taking as types men no longer living, such philosophers as Hobbes and Locke, for example, would probably have been unable to entertain the idea that anyone could be more directly interested in the whole problem of human life than they were. Yet they were incapable of thoroughly objective inquiry into the meaning of human experience. They could not begin with the questions, What is a man? What is the meaning of his wants? What relation do men's wants have to their institutions? What is the relative value of the wants of a living generation and the political system which has been inherited? They looked at men through a philosophy of political society. Their way of looking at men has its uses in human experience, but at best it is an indirect way of looking at men themselves through the medium of something which is only a part of their *impedimenta*. This sort of looking at men inevitably involves an error of refraction which requires correction. Again, Adam Smith would have been honestly astonished if he had been told that in *The Wealth of Nations* the human element concerned was out of true. He did not intend it to be so. He supposed he had provided for the proper perspective of human affairs in his moral philosophy. Nevertheless, when he selected wealth as his particular object of attention, real persons thereupon became and remained a relatively insignificant item in the calculation. The human essential in the whole experience in which wealth occurs fell into the rank of a circumstance which must not be permitted to interfere with the main consideration.

More important than all other instances together is the case of those men who approach problems of knowledge, and particularly knowledge of men, from the religious point of view. It goes without saying that in general they are incomparably the most earnest and disinterested thinkers about human problems. At the same time, religion as we have it in Christendom is not

primarily a search for knowledge at all. It is rather an attempt to use a superhuman standpoint and standard as a means of *valuing* all that may be known. When this fact is stated in the course of objective analysis, and not as an attack upon religion, few competent religious thinkers will challenge the proposition. On the contrary, they take the lead in showing that all the correct lines of knowledge which are drawn within the religious perspective have to be directed as it were by interpretation of human experience from the inside. We need not raise the question of the relative importance of the religious and the positive attitude toward human experience. Enough that both are indispensable. The point is that alone, or in defective proportion with interpretation of the incidents of life by the whole life process itself, the religious attitude toward life is bound to be rated by analytical thinkers as a sort of hypnotic condition, in which neither the observer nor the experience observed is real.

Every type of thinker upon any problem of knowledge whatsoever is needed by the sociological movement. Religious thinkers are certainly not least necessary to the sanity and success of the movement. But each of these types of thinkers, in the degree in which they are in search of the most objective interpretation of human experience which it is possible to gain, should in turn recognize their dependence upon a correlating process in knowledge along the lines which the sociological movement occupies. No judicious sociologist imagines that sociology can ever be a substitute for the sections of scientific labor into which the work of research will always have to be divided. Sociology is first and foremost a call to all species of social investigators to bring their methods and their results together in their bearings upon the meaning of life, instead of allowing their specialization to become sterile by running into isolation from its evaluating center in the whole process of experience.

It is evident to everyone capable of reading the signs of the times that we are living in one of the periods of the reconstruction of fundamental views of life. In the whole range of moral philosophy our outlook is changing as certainly as the outlook of the organic sciences has changed with the arrival of the

Darwinian Era. It would prejudice this argument to attempt a forecast of the specific contents of the *Weltanschauung* which is next to prevail. It seems entirely safe to predict, however, that it will in some way or other reflect the judgments which are the ultimate motives of the sociological movement. In the last analysis and synthesis that we seem likely to achieve, all the experience that we can comprehend will probably image itself as the process of the self-realization of human beings. This does not mean that we shall suppose we may account for the universe in terms of human experience. It simply means that we shall recognize the futility of human attempts to account for more of the universe than can be included in the last discoverable meaning of human experience. The sociologists do not flatter themselves that they are to be the producers of the next prevailing view of the meaning of life. They apparently see more distinctly than anyone else, or at least find it more worth while than anyone else to keep saying, that our interpretation of life must be the composite picture which will be formed out of all possible analyses of phases or outputs of life. Their most important contribution to the coming life-philosophy may turn out to be their insistence that science tends more and more to become an idolatry of the meaningless, unless a reconstructive process goes on step by step with analysis. This necessary process of correlation brings out the values of the details discovered by analysis. These details are worthless for the life-process as a whole until we learn their relative meaning for all human experience.

There is a social movement, or the human process at large, which is as much greater than the sociological movement as life is greater than thought. The social movement is the procession of men through the ages in an uncomprehended relay race toward a goal which can neither be located nor defined. So far as we can make out the process of this experience thus far, and can forecast its future, it is an evolution of activities which take the form of wants which men try to satisfy. In the attempts to satisfy the wants men evolve individuality. They adjust themselves in relations with other men, and through the adjustment

there is first a certain approximate satisfaction of the wants, but incidentally the stimulating wants are remodeled, the manner of man feeling the wants is reconstructed, and the terms of his relations with his fellows are reconsidered. Human experience, so far as we have made it out, is an endless chain of cycles of these modifications. Within them all the persons who successively carry on the process appear on the one hand to be in an inscrutable sense always essentially the same. In another sense, by virtue of the process, they are in the course of incessant change to which our knowledge can prescribe no limit. In this unity in variety of experience persons are the most central, the most significant, the most worthwhile objects which our intelligence can discover.

The sociological movement is a frank endeavor to secure for the human factor in experience the central place which belongs to it in our whole scheme of knowledge and action. This movement has already stimulated types of inquiry which are likely to develop many new divisions of research. It would be foolish to make predictions about the future of the mere name sociology, or about the forms in which the social sciences will arrange themselves, or to argue whether the sociologists are likely to be permanently the peculiar spokesmen for man as man, in distinction from the scholars who select conditions, and aspects, and accidents, and by-products of man's action as their immediate objects of attention. It is not impossible that some of the lines of research which the sociological movement is stimulating may presently fall into the long obituary list of scholastic abstractions which were once virile sciences. It may be that everything which now claims the name sociology will some day pass into the stage of formalism and aloofness from human interests in which it will have only the value of a relic. In that event the organization of knowledge about the things which most intimately concern human beings will doubtless proceed with more timely methods, and with choice of an unsullied name. Meanwhile, those who believe that the destinies of men are the most important object of human interest ought to be able to see that sociology, as we have described it, is the only rallying-point around which the many men

of that mind can at present unreservedly join purposes. *The common creed of the sociological movement may be reduced to two clauses; first, the final judgment which men can pass upon anything of interest to men is discovery of its meaning in the light of all that can be ascertained about the whole process of human experience; second, all men should co-operate in finding out everything, and the relative value of everything, which is available for promoting the permanent interests of men.*

This is not a divisive but a unifying creed. Oriental and occidental, agnostic and Catholic and Protestant, anarchist, socialist, traditionalist, specialist in whatever business or profession or science, may and should profess and illustrate this creed. The more matter-of-course it seems to any of them, the more cordially should they co-operate with the men who believe it is worthy of special emphasis. It is inconceivable that there can be any other unity of faith in the world, or even in Christendom, until all men have adopted this minimum confession. It deprives no one of liberty to defend his belief that his own intellectual and moral standpoint is the most favorable to discovery of permanent human values. It requires no one to profess himself convinced in advance that appraisal of human values by the ultimate sociological criterion has been more justly made at some other point of observation than his own.

The lowest terms of the sociological movement are simply: first, candid promotion of absolute publicity of everything that throws light upon the universal and permanent interests of men; second, loyal support of everything which tends to accelerate the general process of the achievement of human values. By these signs, as the world grows wiser, it will learn to distinguish the men of good will.